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# ST. JOHN HANKIN AND HIS COMEDY OF RECOGNITION

BY P. P. HOWE

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THE English drama as Oscar Wilde left it is the English drama that St. John Hankin took up. "I took the drama," wrote Wilde at the end of his life—"I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or sonnet; at the same time I widened its range and enriched its characterization." That Wilde did not do all these things it is needless to say. Wilde made the theater, or found the theater, rather, a perfect vehicle for his own personal wit; in a sense, by producing "Salome" with the one hand and "The Importance of Being Earnest" with the other, he may be said to have widened the theater's range; but certainly he did not proceed, by elevating character into its rightful importance above action, to open up a new path for the contemporary drama. This he left to be done by his successors and as much by St. John Hankin as by any man. Wilde enriched the English theater with one perfectly delightful play, the Continental theater with another play of peculiar beauty, and the theater everywhere with a tradition of wit at any cost that has proved, in the hands of lesser men, an embarrassing possession. He did not enrich at all the theater's characterization if by this we mean the creation of living and recognizable persons, to know whom is to know more of life, and to wonder at it more pleasurably. If Wilde could surprise us, he was well enough pleased; and his way of surprising us was by shining dialogue and by situations so artfully contrived as often to be quite impossible, rather than by the greater artist's way, which is to show us the wonders in the heart of man. At least he *does* surprise us by dialogue and situation, and to do that is out of reach of the journey-

men. But there is another way that the lesser and more sincere artist than Wilde may take. He may take the beaten path, and by keeping close to character, although he may surprise us very little, he may yet give us the real and constant pleasures of recognition. The advantage of keeping upon this path is that it is the path the great dramatist, when he comes, will inevitably tread, only he will find great surprises in it at every turn. The pioneer dramatist like Hankin (and the beaten path in the arts is always in great need of pioneers), if his bent be gently ironical, will write comedies with an intention very like that of the Restoration writers:

“Follies to-night we show ne’er lashed before,  
Yet such as nature shows you every hour;  
Nor can the pictures give a just offense,  
For fools are made for jests to men of sense.”

Hankin’s people—one might almost write Hankin’s fools, but not quite—may not, as Mrs. Cheveley in “An Ideal Husband” did, “make great demands on one’s curiosity.” But then, in reality, neither do Wilde’s people in the just sense that Shakespeare’s or Sheridan’s people do. The complete justification of Hankin’s minor comedy of recognition is that Nature shows us such people every hour and that the dramatist has rendered them noteworthy by his own fine sense of dramatic style.

Hankin’s work for the theater\* took the form of five full-length comedies, two short plays, and some clear-headed and witty criticism. If we look at the plays we shall soon see how close, in 1904, he was to the Wilde tradition:

LADY FARINGFORD (*to Mrs. Jackson*). “You remember her? She was Stella’s governess. Quite an intelligent, good creature. But I dare say you never met her. She never used to come down to dinner. I always think German governesses so much more satisfactory than English. You see, there’s never any question about having to treat them as ladies. And then they’re always so plain. That’s a great advantage. And German is such a useful language; far more useful for a young girl than French. There are so many more books she can be allowed to read in it. French can be learnt later—and should be in my opinion.”

MRS. PRATT. “I quite agree with you, Lady Faringford. But the Rector is less strict in these matters. He allowed my girls to begin French directly they went to school at Miss Thursby’s. But I’m bound to say they never seem to have learnt any. So perhaps it did no harm.”

\* Collected edition, *The Dramatic Works of St. John Hankin*. Edited by John Drinkwater. Three volumes. New York: Mitchell & Kennerley,

MRS. JACKSON. "Yes, I have always heard Miss Thursby's was an excellent school."

But Wilde would never have written "The Return of the Prodigal." He would never have studied so patiently as Hankin did the lesser country houses of Gloucestershire, Leicestershire, and Dorsetshire. Hankin's first play is set in the suburb of Norwood, and in the suburb of Norwood Wilde could never have been prevailed upon to set foot at all. The Duchess of Berwick and her little chatterbox, Lady Stutfield and the Archdeacon, Lady Bracknel and the Honorable Gwendolen were seen for a moment in galvanic action during the London season; their stage counterparts without the wit were already types in the theaters of Wilde's day. Hankin is at no pains to keep his people from appearing types; the vaguely fatuous old lady or the "very pretty girl of twenty-two" is of frequent recurrence; but Lady Faringford and Stella, Lady Denison and Margery, Mrs. Jackson or the Countess of Remenham, may at any moment falsify their author's small hope of them and develop a character. Hankin was happy in this, too, that no sudden success in the theater set him writing plays out of his mere cleverness and facility. He waited, as the wise artist waits, for an idea and then he made a play of it. Five plays with Hankin mean five genuine ideas apt for comedy. A bad Mr. Wetherby, living in a bachelor flat, and a good Mr. Wetherby, living *en famille*, may shake hands over the walnuts and wine and congratulate each other. "My bad reputation is as hollow as your good one. We're both frauds together." A prodigal son so arranges his return that he gets the whip-hand of his family and is enabled to go out into the wilderness again replenished in his resources. An excellent lady and her pretty daughter arrive at an interesting distinction between the false hospitality and the true, in accordance with which they invite a lot of people to their house not because they like them, but "out of kindness," with results that are both dreadful and amusing. A wise little lady of family, whose son has engaged himself to the usual musical-comedy actress, puts into practice, in the belief that "love thrives on opposition," a plan of killing it by kindness—an exercise, almost mathematical in its neatness, in the process of exhaustion. A minor county family that has run all to tarnished family portraits and not at all to brains or character, and now not even to sons, turns out-of-doors the

daughter who has spirit enough to seek to live her life in her own way; and then when she produces an heir would like to take her back again, but she won't come. The "idea" of a Hankin play is always concrete and well imagined enough to be readily statable in a few words, but its progress is never cluttered up with a lot of unnecessary "ideas." For Hankin is perfectly clear about the essential thing. "It is the dramatist's business," he says, in one of his essays on the plays of other people, "to represent life, not to argue about it."

He is equally clear about the things that make up good stagecraft, the audible and visible things in the dramatist's art that subserve dramatic idea in its illumination of character; but these he did not always achieve so clearly as he may have wished to have done. The critic who finds it comparatively easy to know what he thinks good is liable, when he becomes author, to find himself resting contented with the less good. It is probable that Hankin never wished very consciously for an art of the stage that was much in advance of that which he found around him—no more consciously than Wilde did; but in technical matters, in matters of the general ordering of his stage, his taste was for neatness and the elimination of conventions that were accepted merely because they were easy. His sense of the theater, together with its subtlety, we see very early, when at the final curtain of his first play we have the bad Mr. Wetherby, newly constrained to accept his wife's dominion, and still very easy in his own mind about it, going out carrying "both the bags." In a later play there is a true instance of the way in which the authentic dramatist will secure effect out of the interplay of dialogue with stage possibilities. The Denison family and guests are at dinner, and as the man who looks after the dynamo has been accepted on the same principle as the guests, that of true hospitality—he isn't *really* an electrician—the lights suddenly go out. The ordinarily placid Lady Denison is worried and hopes it isn't going to be one of his bad nights. The lights come on again, and she has no sooner said, "That's better," than they go out afresh. This depresses her, but a moment later the lights recover, have a series of spasms, and finally settle to work again. This is very good; as good as the moment in Wilde's play when Jack, having gone out of the room in great excitement to find the natal hand-bag, a terrible noise

is heard overhead; "It is stopped now," remarks Lady Bracknell, and immediately the noise is redoubled. We all catch ourselves in these little acts of premature congratulation, and the recognition of other people making themselves ridiculous is always pleasant. In addition, Hankin's touch is a touch of the truest comedy; a great deal of dialogue could not give us with such beautiful precision the full amenity of life in this household where charity begins at home.

But Hankin's plays are not especially notable for their good ordering of the stage. He put up with most of the conventions of the theater as he found them. He suffered his first play to be printed with R. C. and L. C. and R. U. E., like a proposition in Euclid, because he was frankly contented that his play should be acted by amateurs; and amateurs have to be told when and where and how to come on—to "move up" or to "cross" or to "come down"—for otherwise they would not be able to act a piece at all. (Happily, in the new collected edition, the play may be read without these things.) Later, of course, he evolved a form of literary stage direction that is particularly his own; something more must be said of this in a moment. In the mean time we may see, by a glance at any one of the plays, that Hankin was content even at the height of his powers to ask actors and producers to do things that they should not be asked to do by a dramatist who has full mastery over his art. In "The Return of the Prodigal" there is a love scene at one side of the stage while, we are told, "*everybody else is immersed in conversation*"—conversation that goes, nevertheless, by one of the most popular and arbitrary conventions of the stage, unreported. Shakespeare has no stage directions that are of guidance on this point, but he, of course, did not pretend to observe the new unity of the stage that, with its retirement within the picture-frame, has come by general consent to be desirable. By the time of the Restoration, however, we may read in several dramatists the direction, "*They talk in dumb show*"—that is to say, one pair of characters has been made to relapse into a sudden silence, not because in reality they would have done so, but factitiously, in order that another pair may have the center of the stage. This expedient of convenience is a characteristic part of the Pinero technique; and in "The Cassilis Engagement" we read, sure enough, "*They converse in dumb show*," while

another couple "come down stage" and engage our ear. There is, of course, no question of right or wrong in this; merely the confession that the dramatist has taken the easiest way instead of conquering an unnecessary convention, for "to conquer an unnecessary convention is one of the greatest delights of an art; to loyally accept and work within a necessary convention is no less a delight"—a remark that Mr. Henry Arthur Jones made once, but did not proceed conspicuously to exemplify. Much depends upon what are the necessary conventions. But here is Hankin, in illustration of the general willingness we have found in him to be upon the side of good sense and economy in technical matters, doing very much better only a few minutes earlier in the same play. Major Warrington and Ethel, it will be remembered, have just been having a rather intimate little talk together. Meantime (we read):

*"Lady Remenham has been conversing in an undertone with Mr. Herries, occasionally glancing over her shoulder at the other two. In the sudden hush which follows Warrington's movement toward the fireplace her voice suddenly becomes alarmingly audible."*

LADY REMENHAM. "Such a common little thing, too! And I don't even call her pretty."

This is at least an admission of the claims of good technique and an honest attempt at their satisfaction; it is a scene that need not distress the best of producers. In itself—and Hankin's work is full of instances of such honest good workmanship—it is an advance on anything Wilde saw to be necessary, who would crowd his stage with conversational groups and bring out one after another into audibility like couples circulating on a merry-go-round, while any necessary business that there might be to be considered he would generally impart quite naïvely in a soliloquy. Hankin is never guilty of soliloquy—or almost never. Janet de Mullin remarks "under her breath," it is true, "Monty Bulstead engaged!"—a lapse which gives us a bad quarter of a minute in an otherwise good play. But Hankin's returned prodigal, having safely secured admission to the family drawing-room and everybody having run in various directions in search of restoratives, does not get up and tell us all about himself. Oh no! He takes advantage of the moment to "raise himself cautiously from his recumbent posture and wring out the bandage on his forehead, which he finds disagreeably wet." This done, he hears the sound of returning footsteps

and "resumes his fainting condition." Everything about the prodigal is revealed in due order and with a proper piquancy; this moment is used in masterly fashion and is a true instance of Hankin's faculty of quietly humorous surprise. It is a moment of very good comedy indeed.

We cannot go further without considering the general question of stage directions. Every play that can be read (and every good play can be read, make no mistake about that!) must make plain to the reader by means of commentary upon the words and actions of the persons all those things which in the theater would be made plain to the spectator by the actor's art and by the constant co-operating service of the stage. Drama is one-half a matter of visual demonstration: a blind man sitting in a theater could take away only one half of a true play's content; and to read the bare printed words of a play is to be in the position of the blind man. The function of the printed stage directions is to supply all that difference between what would be apprehended by the blind man and what would be apprehended by the spectator with the whole quintet of his senses about him. But their function is not to supply more. Mr. Shaw's stage directions do supply more; they will give us the appearance of the front steps, of the entrance-hall, and of the staircase of a house, of which in the theater we see only the interior of one room; and when we get to this room the stage directions will describe it, perhaps, from the point of view of a supernaturally observant sparrow on the window-sill. Mr. Shaw's stage directions do not stop short of giving us the whole flora and fauna of the neighborhood, together with the prevailing political opinion and the amount of the water-rate. But Mr. Shaw's narrative excursions are not in any strict sense stage directions at all; they are delightfully readable, and he could no more issue a play without them than he could issue a play without a preface. Hankin, who did issue a Play without a Preface, hit upon a very happy mean between Mr. Shaw's narrative excursions and the alphabetical efforts of the school whose plays looked like a proposition in Euclid or a handbook of instructions for one desirous of becoming proficient in the Morse code. His stage directions, besides adding to our pleasure by the neatly pointed wit of their expression, do really achieve their true function by giving us exactly, or almost exactly, what we miss through not seeing the play in



the theater. The best moment in the best of Hankin's comedies is thus one in which dialogue plays a small part. Ethel Borridge, bored stiff in the Cassilis drawing-room and rendered quite reckless by the German ballad Mabel has just sung very prettily, determines to show these people what *she* can do. She plunges into a "refined ditty," in which the Hankin who wrote "Lost Masterpieces" has caught quite perfectly the style of the less than first-rate music-hall article. The effect is critical:

MAJOR WARRINGTON. "Splendid, by Jove! Capital!"

*"That, however, is clearly not the opinion of the rest of the listeners, for the song has what is called a 'mixed' reception. The ladies, for the most part, had originally settled themselves into their places prepared to listen to anything which was set before them with polite indifference. A few bars, however, suffice to convince them of the impossibility of that attitude. Lady Remenham, who is sitting on the sofa by Lady Marchmont, exchanges a horrified glance with that lady and with Mrs. Herries on the other side of the room. Mabel looks uncomfortable. The Rector feigns abstraction. Mrs. Cassilis remains calm and sweet, but avoids every one's eye, and more particularly Geoffrey's, who looks intensely miserable. But Warrington enjoys himself thoroughly, and as for Mrs. Borridge, her satisfaction is unmeasured. She beats time to the final chorus, wagging her old head and joining in stentorian accents, finally jumping up from her chair, clapping her hands, and crying, 'That's right, Eth. Give 'em another.' In fact, she feels that the song has been a complete triumph for her daughter and a startling vindication of old Jenkins's good opinion of her powers. Suddenly, however, she becomes conscious of the horrified silence which surrounds her. The cheers die away on her lips. She looks round the room dazed and almost frightened, then hurriedly reseats herself in her chair, from which she has risen in her excitement, straightens her wig, and—there is an awful pause."*

Here we are told—very well told—everything we need to know and nothing that we need not. If we have an ounce of imagination we can see the whole scene for ourselves; but no foolish attempt is made to leave nothing to the imagination. To understand how well and surely this scene is done we have to read not only in the stage directions of other dramatists, but in those of Hankin himself. He is not always, as we have seen, equally sure of himself; if he had been quite as conscious as he might have been that the burden of the dramatist's directions is merely What the Actor Has to Show and nothing else, he would hardly have set Margery Denison the task of showing that she was "quite unconscious of her mother's agitation, as she sat too far from her at luncheon to notice that she was not in her usual spirits" Margery, by her demeanor in the drawing-room,

could hardly be expected to show all that. No, Hankin is here frankly telling us something—as frankly in his own interpolated person as when he tells us somewhere else in the same play that Verreker does not like Hylton, “I’m afraid.” This is, however, the defect of a quality. Hankin really did believe in the drama as “the most objective form known to art.” He is determined that his people shall stand upon their own feet; and, in the light of this admirable determination, his affectation that he knows no more about them than does the reader or spectator is seen to be an amiable little pose.

Of course an absolute objectivity is as impossible in drama as in any other of the arts. Hankin himself is not forever speaking through the mouths of his people, as Mr. Shaw is, reducing them to mere *raisonneurs*; but in their every utterance there is something of his own sense of style and form—his people bear the impress of their author or they would not be his people at all. The most realistic of artists has thus to put shape upon events and speeches or he is no artist. It is probable that Hankin was not a very conscious realist; but because he kept character in the forefront and refused to give in to what was sentimentally expected of him, he was able to make that scene of Ethel shocking her fiancé’s drawing-room as truthful a scene as any on the modern stage. We see most clearly his views on objectivity in drama in the essay already quoted “On Happy Endings.” Being content to represent life and not wishing to argue about it, he need not “end,” as the writer with a thesis wishes to end. His plays have each the neatness and inevitability of a theorem or proposition, but at the end of them there is no Q. E. F. or Q. E. D. This is what he set out to do with his plays:

“I select an episode in the life of one of my characters or a group of characters, when something of importance to their future has to be decided, and I ring up my curtain. Having shown how it was decided and why it was so decided, I ring it down again. The episode is over, and with it the play. The end is ‘inconclusive’ in the sense that it proves nothing. Why should it?”

Why should it, indeed? Does not “Le Misanthrope” of Molière end with the words, “Come, madam, let us leave no stone unturned to hinder the plan he has in view”? Inconclusive words, and yet we are left in no discontent because the play is quite certainly over. It is a different matter

from the ending on a question mark (which is thought to be so clever just now) for no other reason than that the writer has not skill enough to bring his play to a proper end. Hankin, who took the liberty before he wrote plays of his own of showing in his "Dramtic Sequels" that other people's plays need not have ended so soon as they did, showed, in his own turn, that plays need not go on so long. They might stop short of wedding-bells. His own do invariably; partly because to end thus pleased his amiable cynicism, partly because to end thus was quite right. One play, his first, he spoiled. After first begging the question ("I wonder how you two ever came to marry"), the courage of his cynicism failed him, and he flattered the amateurs by reuniting his Constantia and his Dick. Afterward the endings are uniformly "inconclusive" and uniformly right; the disturbing person, having fluttered the dove-cote—Eustace or Verreker or Ethel Borridge or Janet de Mullin—goes out, and the dove-cote settles once more into its lazy and unimaginative peace. The country house is at rest again; free to take cold baths and to shoot partridges, to crochet counterpanes for the sick, and to manipulate orphans into asylums. That is the true ending for the people Hankin chose to depict. The interesting, disturbing people generally do disappear. There is nothing more manifestly recognizable in Hankin than the truthfulness of his endings.

The chief defect in Hankin's plays is their lack of emotional momentum. His comedy is as minor as is that of the Restoration writers, but what he makes up in sincerity they made up in splendid, spirited speech. "How pleasant is resenting an injury without passion," says Sir Harry Wildair, a damnable sentiment stated quite beautifully; and Hankin's people always do everything "without passion." Their author doubtless felt it was pleasanter so. His inability, after he has given his people life, to give them ardor, does not matter much until we come to Janet de Mullin, whose tirade against her family sounds a little thin and tiny for lack of her eagerness in life having been made real to us. Hankin's last play is in many ways his ablest; but on the title-page of his first play he wrote a line from Horace Walpole—"life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel"—that retained its application to his own work to the end. For Hankin thought his way successfully through most of his comedies; but the theme of

"The Last of the De Mullins" is one that demands more feeling than he was able to give it. "Then I met—never mind. And I fell in love with him. Or perhaps I only fell in love with love," says Janet. It is a subject for feeling; but we feel it no more than we feel the "One may like the love and despise the lover, I hope," of Farquhar's pert Melinda. It would not, however, be quite true to say that Hankin worked with his brain alone; numberless touches that we recognize for their emotional truthfulness would have been beyond him so; there are passages like the following with sufficient feeling:

GEOFFREY (*picking rose and bringing it to Ethel*). "A rose for the prettiest girl in England."

ETHEL. "Oh, Geoff, do you think so?"

GEOFFREY. "Of course. The prettiest and the best." [Takes her hand.]

ETHEL. "You do really love me, Geoff, don't you?"

GEOFFREY. "Do you doubt it?" [Kisses her.]

ETHEL. "No; you're much too good to me, you know."

GEOFFREY. "Nonsense, darling."

ETHEL. "It's the truth. You're a gentleman and rich and have fine friends, while mother and I are common as common."

GEOFFREY (*firmly*). "You're *not*."

ETHEL. "Oh yes, we are. Of course I've been to school and been taught things. But what's education? It can't alter how we're made, can it? And she and I are the same underneath."

GEOFFREY. "Ethel, you're not to say such things or to think them."

ETHEL. "But they're true, Geoff."

GEOFFREY. "They're *not*. [Kisses her.] Say they're not."

ETHEL (*shakes her head*). "No."

GEOFFREY. "Say they're *not*. [Kisses her.] *Not!*"

ETHEL. "Very well. They're not."

GEOFFREY. "That's right. [Kiss.] There's a reward."

The last thing to leave Hankin's hand, "The Constant Lover," is all as good as this—a beautifully sustained trifle, very amiable, rather cynical, and very human. Fortunately, being in one act, it has only one curtain. Hankin's final curtains are always good, but he often fails at his intermediate curtains because of his lack of emotional momentum. For it is the fact that criticism may test a dramatist most surely at the moment when he is ringing down his intermediate curtain; it has merely to ask itself the questions: Do I want this play to go on? Is the veil that is coming between me and this uncompleted world almost intolerable? It should be, except at the last, when its very inevitability should of course be satisfying. By however little the dramatist may have left the beaten path of every-

day experience, here, nevertheless, is a moment that must have been so contrived as to "make great demands on one's curiosity." With Hankin, it must be said, one is not so anxious as one should be for the play to go on. Of course, one wants his plays to go on; they would be unreadable otherwise or unable to hold their place in their theater, which emphatically is not the case. But one is a little—what shall we say?—subdued in one's eagerness. Partly this is because the plays, by their nature, hold no great surprise; they will work out; we know they will work out; we know the prodigal will return to the wilderness, the Cassilis engagement end in only one way. Essentially the pleasure of recognition we have in his work is of two kinds—the pleasure of meeting people we know, the pleasure of seeing the episode in which Hankin has involved them come to its logical end. This end will not surprise us; there is no great crisis being at each curtain cleverly deferred. It is a patient, amiable enjoyment that a Hankin play offers. But it might well have a greater, a more steadily growing momentum. This comes in only with true feeling, and the measure of its absence in Hankin is the measure of the difference of his drama from the greatest.

Nevertheless, there are two acts quite perfectly ended: the first act of the "De Mullins," with its skilfully contrived passage between the sisters, and the first act of "The Cassilis Engagement"—"Marry her! Nonsense, my dear Margaret." These are evidence once more of the good things Hankin could do, for which his work will always be valued. He could be quite heartless, as when he is emphasizing some one's "fatuity" or in the uncharitable episode of the maid Anson in the charitable comedy; and then again he could make real a Mrs. Cassilis or an Ethel or a Mrs. Jackson, which no merely clever man could do. At any moment, too, he may demand our pleasure by the gently reminiscent skill with which he reminds us that if we breakfast in our room the crumbs get into our bed, or that it is the custom after a really terrible experience to thank our hostess for such a pleasant evening. It is a quality that is near at least to the humor that is universal. By an accident of commercial organization Hankin's work has been kept from the general theater; but it will find its place there, and it will keep its place because it will continue to give this pleasure.

P. P. HOWE.